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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to examine the moderating effects of attributions on the relationship between marital satisfaction and marital violence. It was predicted that distressed spouses who made more maladaptive attributions for partner behavior would be more likely to engage in marital violence than would distressed spouses who offered fewer maladaptive attributions for partner behavior. Sixty-six married couples participated in the study. Each spouse independently completed a battery of self-report measures and provided demographic information. Subjects completed the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS), the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), and the Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM). The findings revealed that, consistent with prior research, decreased marital satisfaction was significantly associated with increased marital violence for husbands and for wives. Increasing marital distress was significantly associated with more causal attributions and more responsibility attributions for negative partner behaviors. Marital violence was significantly related to maladaptive responsibility attributions among husbands. Marital violence was not related to causal attributions among husbands, nor was marital violence related to responsibility attributions or causal attributions among wives. The findings revealed that attributional processes moderated the relationship between marital satisfaction and marital violence among husbands, but not among wives. (NB)

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# Attributions for Partner Behavior in Violent and Nonviolent Couples

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# Attributions for Partner Behavior in Violent and Nonviolent couples

In efforts to increase our understanding of marital violence, researchers have recently begun to examine attributions offered by violent couples for this behavior. One approach to this area of research is based on the association of marital distress with marital violence and involves the examination of attributional patterns of discordant couples (Holtzworth-Munroe, Jacobson, Fehrenbach, & Fruzzetti, 1992).

Researchers studying attributions in marriage have focused on two types of attributions: 1) Causal attributions, which pertain to explanations a spouse makes for the occurrence of an event; and 2) Responsibility attributions, which concern a spouse's accountability or answerability for an event. Empirical investigations into the attributional processes of married couples indicate that discordant couples tend to offer distress-maintaining attributions, attributing responsibility for negative partner behavior to their spouse but excusing their own negative behavior (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985). Data also suggest that distressed couples are likely to perceive their partner's negative behaviors as selfish and blameworthy and to then respond with negative affective arousal, such as anger, and consequent

punishing behavior (Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that distressed couples offer more causal attributions for negative spouse behavior than for positive spouse behavior, and this has not been found for nondistressed couples (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1985).

The purpose of this study was to examine the moderating effects of attributions on the relationship between marital satisfaction and marital violence. Based on the aforementioned findings, it was predicted that distressed spouses who make more maladaptive attributions for partner behavior would be more likely to engage in marital violence than distressed spouses who offer fewer maladaptive attributions for partner behavior.

## Method

### Subjects

Sixty-six married couples participated in this study. All couples were recruited from the community via radio advertisements and flyers requesting "married couples for a study of couple interactions" and received monetary compensation for their participation. (See Tables 1 and 2).

### Procedure

Upon arrival, each spouse independently completed a battery of self-report paper and pencil measures and provided

demographic information. Measures employed for the current investigation are described below.

The Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS). The CTS (Straus, 1979) is an 18-item questionnaire used to assess the extent to which spouses use reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical violence in resolving conflicts in the relationship. The graduated series of items range from "tried to discuss an issue calmly" to "used a knife or gun." Respondents indicated the frequency of each item relative to their own behavior toward their spouse and relative to their spouse's behavior toward her or him. (See Table 3).

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). The DAS (Spanier, 1976) is a 32-item questionnaire used to assess global marital adjustment and satisfaction. This instrument is widely used and has been shown to reliably discriminate between distressed and nondistressed couples.

Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM). The RAM (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992) consists of four hypothetical negative partner behaviors such as "your spouse criticizes something you say." Respondents are instructed to imagine their spouses engaging in each of these negative behaviors and to rate their agreement with each of seven statements on a 6-point Likert scale (ranging from disagree strongly to agree strongly). The first set of four items assesses attributions

of causality: locus (self and partner), stability, and globality. The second set of three items assesses attributions of responsibility: intentionality, motivation, and personal responsibility.

## Results

Consistent with prior research, decreased marital satisfaction was significantly associated with increased marital violence for husbands, $r(64) = -.35$, $p < .05$, and wives, $r(63) = -.26$, $p < .05$. Similarly, increasing marital distress was significantly associated with more causal attributions and more responsibility attributions for negative partner behaviors (see Table 4). As predicted, marital violence was significantly related to maladaptive responsibility attributions among husbands. However, marital violence was not related to causal attributions among husbands, nor was marital violence related to responsibility attributions or causal attributions among wives.

In order to test the moderating effects of husbands' attributional processes on the relationship between their marital satisfaction and use of marital violence, two multiple regression analyses were conducted following guidelines set forth by Baron and Kenny (1986). After conducting median splits on attribution scores, marital violence was regressed on attribution group, marital

satisfaction, and the Group X Marital satisfaction interaction term. A significant contribution to the equation by the interaction term indicates that the relationship between marital satisfaction and marital violence is moderated by attributional processes.

Results supported the hypothesis that the relationship between marital dissatisfaction and marital violence would be stronger among husbands who make maladaptive attributions for their wives' behavior. Responsibility attributions were found to moderate the relationship between marital satisfaction and marital violence, as indicated by the significant interaction term, $t(1) = -2.3$, $p < .05$. The inverse relationship between marital satisfaction and marital violence was stronger among husbands high in attributions of responsibility, $r(29) = -.59$, $p < .05$ than husbands low in attributions of responsibility, $r(33) = -.18$, ns. Similarly, causal attributions were also found to moderate the relationship between marital satisfaction and marital violence, as indicated by the significant interaction term, $t(1) = -2.03$, $p < .05$. The inverse relationship between marital satisfaction and marital violence was stronger among husbands high in attributions of causality, $r(29) = -.45$, $p < .05$ than husbands low in attributions of causality, $r(32) = .14$, ns.

## Discussion

Attributional processes moderated the relationship between marital satisfaction and marital violence among husbands, but not wives. Specifically, the relationship between marital satisfaction and marital violence was significant for husbands who make more maladaptive attributions for their partners' behavior. This relationship was not significant for husbands making more adaptive attributions. It seems that husbands are more likely to engage in violence when they perceive their partners as blameworthy for their negative behavior and as the cause of that negative behavior. This finding may reflect a process whereby husbands who form maladaptive attributions for their partners' behavior may be more prone to anger arousal and, hence, more likely to respond to the partner's behavior with similarly negative, punishing behavior, including violence potentially.

These results have implications for the treatment of marital violence. Current marital interventions consist of a combination of anger control, problem-solving, and communication skills training in order to increase marital satisfaction. These existing programs assume that marital satisfaction decreases the frequency of conflict. However, conflict in marriage is inevitable and so are negative spouse behaviors. It appears that greater attention must be devoted

to attributional processes. If spouses who make maladaptive attributions can be guided in making more appropriate attributions for their partners' behaviors, their potential for engaging in violence may be reduced or eliminated more successfully.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Wives and Husbands

| Variable | Wives (n=66) | Husbands (n=66) |
|---|---|---|
| Age in Years | | |
| M | 26.9 | 27.8 |
| SD | 7.1 | 6.9 |
| Years of Education | | |
| M | 15.9 | 16.4 |
| SD | 2.1 | 2.4 |
| Marital Satisfaction (DAS) | | |
| M | 116.2 | 115.3 |
| SD | 13.3 | 15.1 |
| Violence toward Partner (CTS) | | |
| M | 9.9 | 9.1 |
| SD | 4.4 | 4.1 |
| Violence by Partner (CTS) | | |
| M | 8.8 | 9.8 |
| SD | 2.3 | 4.6 |

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Couples

| Variable | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Years Married | 3.6 | 5.4 |
| Number of Children | .4 | .8 |
| Yearly Household Income | 20,476.5 | 11,294.6 |

Table 3

Reports of Perpetration

| CTS item | Husbands n | Wives n |
|---|---|---|
| Threw something at partner | 10 | 5 |
| Pushed, grabbed, or shoved | 17 | 15 |
| Slapped | 11 | 5 |
| Kicked, bit, or hit with a fist | 10 | 2 |
| Hit or tried to hit with something | 7 | 3 |
| Beat up | 0 | 0 |
| Threatened with a knife or gun | 0 | 0 |
| Used a knife or fired a gun | 0 | 0 |

Table 4

Correlations Between Attributions and Marital Satisfaction and Marital Violence

| | Causal Attribution Composite | Responsibility Attribution Composite |
|---|---|---|
| | r | r |
| | Wives | |
| Marital Satisfaction | -.48** | -.60** |
| Violence toward Partner | .00 | .01 |
| | Husbands | |
| Marital Satisfaction | -.59** | -.43** |
| Violence toward Partner | .21 | .39* |

*$p < .01$, **$p < .001$